In Alabama prison, John Mitchell will be with own kind of criminal

By FRED BRUNING
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In the federal prison camp at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., John Mitchell will be among his own kind — criminals considered reliable enough to be separated from freedom only by a three-foot hedge. His neighbors will be forgers, auto thieves, moonshiners, tax cheats, narcotics violators and a variety of other convicts.

The former attorney general, convicted of assisting in the Watergate cover-up, will begin serving his 2½-to-8-year sentence on June 22 in a facility known widely as the "Maxwell Country Club."

Tree-shaded and well-manicured, the camp houses only those prisoners with no record of assaultive behavior. Usually inmates are first-offenders. Usually their sentences are short. The ambience is such that one inmate said: "Most of the people I've talked to who have been to other prisons like it here."

Inmates work at Maxwell — Mitchell's assigned duties will take into consideration his 65 years — but the demands are considerably less than those attendant with running the U.S. Justice Department or a presidential campaign.

Leisure opportunities are ample at the camp. There are movies one night a week. The 300 inmates have access to a miniature golf course. If softball is their preference, that, too, is available. The phones are hooked directly to long-distance operators, although calls must be collect. There are chapters of the Jaycees and Alcoholics Anonymous. And there is an active Christian fellowship program — the one, in fact, that was instrumental in the conversion of another Watergate personality, Charles Colson.

Commenting on life at Maxwell, Colson once had kind words for the prison cuisine, which he found "surprisingly good."

Should John Mitchell be disinclined toward some of the prison's general issue — toothpaste, say — he will be able to purchase his favorite brands at the camp commissary.

The decision by federal authorities to send Mitchell to Maxwell is based, officials say, on safety considerations. "We are naturally concerned about his safety as a former law enforcement officer, and we are placing him in a smaller, minimum security camp where it is believed he will be secure," said a spokesman for the federal Bureau of Prisons.

It is unlikely that Mitchell would have been assigned to a prison with a more desperate population, in any case. Fred LaRue, another Nixon official, was imprisoned at Maxwell. Other eastern-based Watergate figures served their sentences at the minimum security farm camp at Allenwood, Pa. That institution, too, has a reputation for being a good place to do time.